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The Radical Habitus and the Knowledge Practices of the Irish Organic Food Movement

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Abstract

The aims of the organic food movement include the transformation of food production, distribution and consumption. They necessitate a range of different skills and understandings which must be accessed, created, put to use and shared by its members. This paper adopts a Bourdieusian framework, as modified by Crossley, to analyse and explain the main knowledge practices of members of the movement, namely the ways in which they access, combine and diffuse information, skills and ideas. It examines data collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews and analysis of social media interaction, over a ten-year period. The article highlights the role of the sociocultural context for knowledge practice, while at the same time acknowledging the agency of individual members in seeking out and sharing learning experiences. In particular, the argument presented stresses the ideology of the organic food movement, which is embedded in members' habitus, and which guides their everyday interaction with each other, with food, and with knowledge in systematic and consistent ways.

Keywords: Organically grown food; Locally produced foods, Knowledge, sociology of; Politics and culture; Radical habitus, Rules and practice

Introduction

Organic farming is a system of food production that aims to produce food without the use of agricultural chemicals by applying alternative or traditional methods for fertilising the soil and keeping animals healthy. It often also involves selling locally instead of into an unsustainable global food system, and it seeks to produce food in ways that minimise damage to local biodiversity and wildlife. In order to produce food for human consumption without compromising natural sustainability, organic farmers and growers need new or alternative methods and ways of farming and growing. In other words, they need new or different forms of knowledge as compared to some of those used in conventional farming. This paper analyses the ways in which people involved in producing and consuming organic food relate to knowledge. In doing so, it highlights the importance of understanding organic farming as a social movement and of recognising role of the ideology of the organic movement as a guiding principle in members' knowledge practices. It utilises Bourdieu's theory of practice, with some amendments, to make sense of the ways in which members of the organic food movement use, access, create and share knowledge, ideas and information.

The Irish Organic Food Movement

Most observers agree that food production – and consumption – must change. The many predicaments associated with the modern, intensive food industry are well documented. Industrialised food production has been associated, not only with natural damage¹ and with danger to human health², but also with social injustice, transferring as it does power to agrifood corporations and chemical manufacturers³ and away from both producers and consumers. Organic food is one way in which our relationship with nature, the relations of production, and the cultural meanings of food can be challenged and transformed. Most of us are aware of the aspects of organics that concern production, such as the avoidance of chemical artificial fertilisers, pesticides and weedkillers. In addition, however, the organic system values local food economies in which food is bought and sold in face-to-face interactions between consumer and producer, such as at farmers' markets or box schemes. Organic production, distribution and consumption practices were developed, and are adhered to, by members of the organic food movement⁴. Their motivations are political rather than instrumental or financial, in the wider sense that 'the personal is political'.⁵ There are approximately 1,720⁶ farmers and growers registered with the three Irish organic associations, IOFGA, Organic Trust and Demeter. However, many more produce organic food for their own consumption without being officially registered. For the purposes of this paper, these producers, as well as organic food consumers who support the organic food system, will all be included as members of the wider social movement.

The aim of this movement, building an alternative food system, requires new forms of knowledge. Members of the organic movement engage in many different practices that aim at the construction, development and diffusion of skills and ideas. The Irish organic food movement is particularly suitable for an examination of how members of a social movement access, pass on, and make use of knowledges. The organic movement in Ireland was started by people who wanted a self-sufficient lifestyle and who sought to escape an urban existence.⁷ Many did so following a particular life event such as a serious illness, or because of a growing concern about the environmental crisis. They bought small plots of land in areas characterised by rural depopulation, often in remote or mountainous regions where land was cheap. Most of its members therefore come from a non-farming background, and many have moved to Ireland from urban settings in other countries. Others have converted from conventional farming, perhaps when faced with financial difficulties. All have very consciously had to learn new ways of living, producing and consuming according to the ideology of the movement as set down in a set of regulations imposed by the three

¹ Jonathan Murdoch and Mara Miele, "Back to Nature: Changing 'worlds of Production' in the Food Sector," *Sociologia Ruralis* 39, no. 3 (1999).

² Henk Renting, Terry K Marsden, and Jo Banks, "Understanding Alternative Food Networks: Exploring the Role of Short Food Supply Chains in Rural Development," *Environment and Planning A* 35, no. 3 (2003), doi:10.1068/a3510.

³ Philip McMichael, "The Power of Food," *Agriculture and Human Values* 17 (2000).

⁴ Matthew Reed, "Fight the Future! How the Contemporary Campaigns of the UK Organic Movement Have Arisen from Their Composting of the Past," *Sociologia Ruralis* 41, no. 1 (2001), doi:10.1111/1467-9523.00173.

⁵ Hilary Tovey, "Food, Environmentalism and Rural Sociology: On the Organic Farming Movement in Ireland," *Sociologia Ruralis* 37, no. 1 (1997), doi:10.1111/1467-9523.00034.

⁶ Alison Healy, "Too Many Farmers 'afraid' to Go Organic, Says Junior Minister," *The Irish Times*, October 14, 2014.

⁷ Oliver Moore, "Spirituality, Self-Sufficiency, Selling and the Split: Collective Identity or Otherwise in the Organic Movement in Ireland, 1936-1991" (paper presented at the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) Conference, Sligo IT, August 18–22, 2003).

organisations. They therefore offer an insightful case for the study of the role of knowledge and skills in social change.

Social Movements, Knowledge and Practice

Knowledge is an important resource for all social movements. Practical and theoretical ideas and skills enable the pursuit of alternatives, while the diffusion of movement ideas and beliefs to a wider community facilitates mobilisation. Most writers in the field of social movement studies fall on either side of what sociologists call the structure/agency debate. Thus, the classic scholars in this tradition tend to highlight the ways in which the social and cultural context, structure, imposes certain actions and beliefs onto individuals and groups. They argue that movements are more or less mechanical responses among groups who feel strains or pressures of society's inequalities⁸, and that the particular form of a society determines what type of movements will arise within them.^{9,10,11} The structural view of social movements is useful in that it helps us understand how various contexts influence movement activity. However, many feel it is overly deterministic. It tends to ignore or downplay agency, or the creative abilities of groups and individual actors. Other writers err on the side of abandoning context for agency altogether. They focus exclusively on the interaction within groups and movements¹² or the strategies of movement actors,¹³ while paying little attention to the context in which such activities take place. Such issues of structure and agency divide sociological analysis, neither side able to gain a complete understanding of the relationship between creative agents and the context that is both shaped by and shaping them. What is needed is a theoretical framework that acknowledges both the determining quality of structure – the sociocultural context – and also the creative, innovative abilities of movement actors themselves. Significantly, some of the most recent writings on social movements point to the importance of personal experience in the creation of knowledge and choice of action. For example, Haenfler, Johnson and Jones¹⁴ believe that political action is as much about lifestyle and everyday action as it is about revolution and protest. Furthermore, Gill¹⁵ argues that movements practice a 'living politics' in that their lived experiences and struggles provide them with insights that are superior to external academic theory for understanding the issues at hand.

Lived experience as the foundation of future action is central to the work of sociological theorist Pierre Bourdieu. His theory of practice sets out to overcome the problems of structure and agency mentioned above. Practice, for Bourdieu,¹⁶ is action shaped by a person's experience, available resources, and past and present contexts – in his words,

⁸ Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, Repr. [d. Ausg.] 1962, International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).

⁹ Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Ann Swidler, "Cultural Power and Social Movements," in *Social Movements and Culture*, ed. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

¹¹ Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York : Paris: Cambridge University Press ; Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1981).

¹² Herbert Blumer, "Social Movements," in *Social Movements: Critiques, Concepts, Case-Studies*, ed. Stanford M. Lyman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1951).

¹³ John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1977).

¹⁴ Ross Haenfler, Brett Johnson, and Ellis Jones, "Lifestyle Movements: Exploring the Intersection of Lifestyle and Social Movements," *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 1 (2012), doi:10.1080/14742837.2012.640535.

¹⁵ Gerard Gill, "Knowledge Practices in Abahlali baseMjondolo," *Interface* 6, no. 1 (2014).

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511812507.

habitus, capital and field. For Bourdieu, knowledge and skills can be seen as forms of cultural capital, symbolic resources that help a person gain power and succeed in a particular social context. Furthermore, Bourdieu can also help us understand that the ways in which individuals engage with skills, ideas and knowledges are rarely random. Instead, practice is characterised by certain levels of consistency. It is shaped by past experience, which is embedded in a person's habitus, a "system of durable, transposable dispositions",¹⁷ or practical hypotheses based on lived experience. The habitus consists of a system of internalised structures which manages strategies and actions¹⁸. It ensures that we 'choose' to react relatively consistently in a wide range of social situations. Each time we enter a social situation, a variety of options – or choices of action – are open to us. It is the habitus which helps us decide upon appropriate behaviour – "things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say".¹⁹ Practice tends to be shared by members of the same social or cultural group, because of similarities in their habitus, such as with members of a particular social class or indeed a social movement. It is both constrained and facilitated by the context, or the social and cultural 'rules' of the field in which it plays out, yet it is also characterised by a certain amount of agency: Actors engage in the 'game' of social life and choose their strategies according to what they have learnt by past interaction in similar circumstances.²⁰ Like recent social movement scholars mentioned above, Bourdieu therefore highlights the important role of experience in generating practice. Experiences in particular fields are what shape the habitus, and this in turn effects future practices. The habitus is also reinforced by other agents who have had similar experiences. Such shared dispositions make practices "imminently intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted".²¹ It gives the continuity and social order that society requires to thrive.

This focus on continuity and stability of practice means that utilising Bourdieu's concept of practice for understanding a social movement such as the organic food movement is not straightforward. Organic farmers, growers and consumers are as actors working for change in the field of food production, according to the specific goals and aims of the movement and its particular philosophy. However, if we follow Bourdieu's logic, it would be tempting to see skills and knowledges as resources that are passed down from one generation to the next in a somewhat automatic and habitual way. What is missing from Bourdieu's model is the ability of individuals to think critically and openly about knowledge and skills. Organic farmers and growers, as members of a social movement, are particularly likely to be reflexive and critical in relation to their own practices. Thus, we need to amend the concept of practice to allow for more reflexivity and agency on the part of actors. For Bourdieu, practice is mostly influenced by early life experiences, and in particular a person's social class which has shaped their habitus, their way of being in the world. In fact, Bourdieu argues that it is almost impossible for an individual to change.²² This focus on the re-enactment of past structures is the reason why Bourdieu's theory has frequently been criticised for focussing on reproduction rather than social change. For example, his work on education has

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, "Structure, Habitus and Practice," in *The Polity Reader in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 96.

¹⁸ Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "The Structure and Logic of Bourdieu's Sociology," in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, by Loïc J. D. Wacquant and Pierre Bourdieu (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 53.

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²¹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, 80.

²² Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 68.

analysed the reproduction of the class system through the shaping of the habitus in that field²³, where existing class relations are reproduced through the education system.

Crossley^{24,25} however, has adapted Bourdieu's framework to better suit the study of social movements. Bourdieu's theory may appear ill-equipped to deal with movements, protests or the rapid social change we often imagine they bring. Crossley's solution is simple: he recognises that there is rarely anything sudden, or rapid, about social movements. Rather, the visible protests that occasionally erupt are supported by sustained social relations in lasting long term networks, or what Melucci²⁶ calls the submerged reality of movements. A social movement, Crossley believes, consists of both ongoing critique and innovation as well as direct protest. Furthermore, unlike in Bourdieu's account, for Crossley it is possible for an individual to change. Crossley turns to the concept of habitus, arguing that members of social movements are characterised by what he calls a *resistance habitus*²⁷ or a *radical habitus*.²⁸ For Crossley, humans are "historical beings who are affected and transformed by significant life events",²⁹ and their habitus can be altered by, for example, partaking in social movement activities. The radical habitus can develop when agents gain such new experiences that no longer support their old dispositions. They actively change their own worldview and habits accordingly. The radical habitus "generates protest and critique",³⁰ new ways of thinking and knowing. It makes activists consistently disposed towards critical thought and confrontation.

Therefore, a life changing event such illness, financial difficulties, a growing awareness of climate change or an engagement with the networks of alternative food movements, may radicalise the habitus of food producers and consumers and make them disposed towards a critical assessment of the current food system. Avoidance of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, more humane treatment and food animals, and selling or shopping at local markets, are all political practices that rooted in a more reflexive way of relating to food. They are not random or irrational but consistent and systematic, and rooted in a radical habitus, and they are aimed at changing the wider context – the field of food production. Likewise, how a person deals with and relates to knowledge, experts and ideas may be a relatively constant way of acting, learnt over time, in specific contexts. We can therefore use the term knowledge practices to identify the actual ways in which agents create, evaluate, obtain and pass on understandings, information and skills. They arise from the habitus and are shaped by lived experience, like other practices. Knowledge practices may be considered 'radical' if they are active, critical and reflexive, rather than habitual and taken-for-granted. Such radical ways in relation to skills and ideas are necessary for developing new techniques for producing more sustainable food, and they underpin the methods of organic farming. The question remains, how exactly does the radical habitus influence and shape the knowledge practices of members of the Irish organic food movement?

²³ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, 1990 ed, Theory, Culture & Society (London ; Newbury Park, Calif: Sage in association with Theory, Culture & Society, Dept. of Administrative and Social Studies, Teesside Polytechnic, 1990).

²⁴ Nick Crossley, "Working Utopias and Social Movements: An Investigation Using Case Study Materials from Radical Mental Health Movements in Britain," *Sociology* 33, no. 4 (1999), doi:10.1177/S0038038599000516.

²⁵ Nick Crossley, "From Reproduction to Transformation: Social Movement Fields and the Radical Habitus," *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 6 (2003), doi:10.1177/0263276403206003.

²⁶ Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).

²⁷ Crossley, "Working Utopias and Social Movements."

²⁸ Crossley, "From Reproduction to Transformation."

²⁹ Nick Crossley, *Making Sense of Social Movements* (Buckingham ; Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 2002), 176.

³⁰ Crossley, "From Reproduction to Transformation," 61.

Method

To explore such ideas, this article presents empirical data gathered among members of the Irish organic food movement. Members are defined as producers and consumers of organic food who engage in movement networks, events and settings such as local markets or meetings of organic food groups. These interactions were chosen because they reflect the key aspects of the ideology of the organic food movement: the avoidance of any unnecessary artificial inputs into food production in the belief that it will protect both natural biodiversity and human wellbeing, as well as the preference for a local food economy rather than a global system dominated by multinational corporations and extensive food miles. The fieldwork was carried out during regular intervals in the period between 2005 and 2015. The material for the current paper arises from fifteen in-depth interviews with eighteen individuals in total, twenty participant observation sessions at key settings such as organic market stalls, open days and workshops held on organic farms, and extensive documentary analysis of leaflets, magazines and social media in the form of naturally occurring online interaction on facebook and twitter as well as websites, online magazines and blogs. All data were transcribed, coded and analysed using thematic analysis. For ethical reasons, all names and identifying details of participants have been changed.

Findings: the Radical Habitus and Organic Knowledge Practices

If we utilise Crossley's Bourdieusian framework, knowledge is a form of cultural capital, and possessing the right kind in the right circumstances (the right field) can bring power and status. However, knowledge is also constructed, used and passed on through practice in systematic and coherent ways. This section considers such knowledge practices among members of the Irish food movement. As we will see, they are consistent, arising from habitus and field. They are embedded within other everyday practices such as those for producing, distributing and consuming food. There are three main ways in which members of the organic movement relate to knowledge, three different knowledge practices, all of which are influenced by the ideology of the organic food movement and the habitus of its members. They are: accessing knowledge; combining different forms of knowledge and information; and diffusing skills and knowledge to others.

Accessing Knowledge through new Experiences

First of all, the processes whereby organic food producers and consumers access or acquire such knowledges need to be examined. Organic food production and consumption – like any other activity – necessitates the use of knowledge in various forms, from practical skills to ideas and worldviews. However, the possession of such knowledges cannot be taken for granted. In order to live according to organic ideology, members need knowledges that may not have previously been available to them. While some participants in the current study are carrying on the family farm inherited from their parents, more often than not, the actors encountered are of urban, middle class backgrounds, trained and educated in seemingly unrelated fields such as teaching, nursing or painting, who have sought new livelihoods. They have therefore had to obtain the skills, information and understandings necessary to produce and sell food, when setting up a new life and a new enterprise. As discussed above, Bourdieu^{31,32} sees education and knowledge transfer as a form of social and cultural reproduction. The organic producers and consumers interviewed for this study, however, do

³¹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*.

³² Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*.

not simply unthinkingly make use of the knowledge that is embedded in a habitus shaped by their childhood experiences. Instead, as we shall see, they actively and reflexively seek out new skills and understandings, based on a more radical habitus.

The ability to access knowledge is in fact a skill in itself. While the organic movement's ideology values moving to the countryside and setting up a local food system, local knowledge needs to be attained by the ex-urban, would-be organic producer. As Richard explains "I came to Ireland in 1974 and when we came over there were quite a few blow-ins, and we all had the same problem, that we wanted to be organic but no-one knew how to do it". Thus, many new organic producers have found themselves in an unfamiliar context, removed from the field which had shaped their habitus in childhood. Such new experiences may help radicalise their habitus, as Crossley argues, and give them a more critical and reflexive disposition towards both food production and knowledge construction.

In interviews, other organic farmers explain how they utilise different strategies for obtaining knowledge. Many speak of trying to access local knowledge from neighbouring farmers, in most cases the previous generation, who still remember how farming was carried out before the introduction of chemicals. This is the resurrection of skills or worldviews that have been dismissed by modernity as unscientific or irrational.³³ One vegetable grower reflects on how she has done this in a deliberate and conscious manner:

Jane: When I came down to live here first I decided I wanted to be a farmer. And I spent a year getting drunk, because I discovered the best way to get knowledge out of the old people was to talk to them in the pubs. So I spent a year in the pubs, just devouring every piece of knowledge. And then if I remembered, I'd go home and write it down [laughs].

Interviewer: Did you have a strategy?

Jane: Old man at the counter, sit down next to him, 'nice day', chat away, 'you're a farmer?' "Yeah, was, you know, son's taken it over now", 'what did you do? Did you ever hear of this variety of such and such, did you ever hear of that variety?' [Feigns surprise:] "You know about them?" And this was hundreds of these old men, and the minute that you knew something of the old varieties they would stay there all day talking to you. So, I learnt an awful lot from that.³⁴

Accessing local knowledge often means obtaining information about the local geographical and climatic conditions which will then become the basis for new or improved methods for farming. In Jane's case, local knowledge also serves as an identity marker, providing access to further information. Knowledge here serves as a resource, which can be assessed, evaluated and exchanged. From a Bourdieusian point of view, local forms of knowledge about traditional methods or plants become symbolic capital, granting a certain prestige to the person possessing it. It then gives access into the privileged world of the older farmers and their skills and practices.

However, knowledge is not always available, and a second way of accessing ideas and skills is constructing one's own. When asked in interviews to consider the processes whereby they acquire new skills or understandings, all organic farmers report carrying out their own 'experiments' or 'research': they take on the role of knowledge producer, which has otherwise been the monopoly of officially sanctioned experts. They carry out the same practices, and they engage in the same processes for the creation of new understandings and

³³ Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics* (Theory, Culture & Society, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1998).

³⁴ Jane Murphy, interview by Annette Jorgensen, February 5, 2005.

innovations, as laboratory technicians and scientists. In an interview, organic beef farmer John explains that:

What I do like is trying things, like I'm hoping now this year to put down three or four different types of grass seeds in the same field and compare them, so that I can see you know, how they would do.³⁵

Here again we see a tendency for reflexion and active engagement with knowledge, consistent with a critical view of food production and rooted in a radical habitus. Thus, to 'play the game' of organic food production, organic growers and farmers must accumulate skills. They are trying to change the field of food production, the practices of conventional farming, in a reflexive and conscious way. Through trial and error processes, organic food producers create new experiences from which they learn and build up a repertoire of skills and understandings. They clearly adopt an active role. At the same time, their experimentation is not random, it is guided by an underlying set of principles, which also inform their attitude towards food production in general. The next point illustrates this more clearly.

Combining Knowledge through Social Resonance

All practice builds on a range of skills and knowledges. In most cases, these may be learnt through childhood experiences and embedded in the habitus and repertoire for acting upon later in relatively unproblematic ways and without much reflexion. However, in their search for more sustainable practices for food production, members of the organic food movement find themselves faced with diverse and seemingly contradictory ideas and techniques, from scientific research to local traditions. Knowledge in organic production and consumption is multifaceted and heterogeneous. Local knowledge, developed through personal experience or accessed from one's community, is combined with scientific research findings, and its consequent technology and innovations. If we accept Crossley's concept of the radical habitus, we can argue that organic producers are likely to be more critically disposed towards conventional methods of food production as well as towards knowledge claims. However, they must select and put to use skills in order to create the alternative they seek. So, how do they choose between available ideas, understandings and knowledges?

Movement members actively and reflectively try out combinations of knowledges, difficult though that may seem. For example, a former architect and new organic vegetable grower visits an open day organised by Teagasc (the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority). Interviewed on the day, he reflects on where he accesses information. He explains that he normally relies on his local network of similar-minded people, other smallholders, people who sell at his local market, the organic organisations, and Teagasc itself. Engaging in interaction with agents involved at such different levels of organic food production – from self-sufficient smallholders to the state – allows this newcomer to extract for himself the different knowledges he needs at different stages of his and his family's organic 'career'. In the fieldnotes from a farm walk hosted by John, we can see how he deciphers old local knowledge into an understanding accessible to all through a modern understanding based on basic biology:

John is talking to people, who form a smaller circle around him. He is talking about weeds, thistles in particular. He quotes an old rhyme, 'Cut in May it will surely stay, cut in June it is still too soon, cut in July it will surely die'. He continues, 'Really all they're saying there in that rhyme is that if you cut it at the

³⁵ John Walker, interview by Annette Jorgensen, April 3, 2006.

point where it's put so much energy into getting a seed head up, that's it, it can't produce another bunch of seeds that year'.

At the same time, members of the movement frequently refer to and share the findings of scientific research into environmental issues, both in person and on social media, such as tweeting links to articles about climate change, the loss of biodiversity or the nutritional benefits of food produced without the use of agricultural chemicals. For example, one organic organisation recently shared a link on facebook to an article on the BBC website, entitled "Organic farming benefits biodiversity", based on scientific research by Swansea University.

The ways in which organic farmers and consumers engage with such different kinds of knowledge and skills at first appear to have no rhyme or reason. The findings presented so far seem to betray any pattern, and they contradict previous attempts at categorising knowledge into different types, local and scientific knowledge, which are used and diffused in systematic ways by different sets of actors. Instead, organic farmers and consumers combine a range of different knowledge forms and ways of knowing. How can we explain these seemingly random behaviours? First, let us return to the concept of knowledge practice. Bourdieu assures us that there is logic in practice. And in fact, on further consideration, there is a pattern to the ways in which organic farmers and consumers engage with knowledge. By using certain techniques for food production, preparation and consumption, members of the organic movement reproduce and reinforce the values and ideology of the organic movement. They do the same in combining and hybridising knowledges, whether online or face-to-face. A radical habitus, which is informed by experiences throughout their lives, including their membership of the organic food movement, influences their way of relating to knowledge. This critical disposition allows them to rethink their relationship with both food and with knowledge in a relatively coherent way.

The heterogeneous knowledge that allows organic food production is always selected in accordance with organic ideology. What the different kinds of knowledge have in common is that they 'fit' with the framework through which organic farmers view the world. This ideology is what allows them to recognise particular forms of knowledge, or types of capital in Bourdieu's words, as desirable. The system of alternative food production favoured by the organic movement is based on the avoidance of chemicals, and a return to traditional methods for weed control and soil fertility. It seeks to preserve or recreate biodiversity in a defence against the monoculture of the industrialised food system. Organic discourse highlights respect and coexistence rather than control or termination of any species, and organic ideology builds on Gandhian philosophy.³⁶ This attitude of respect and openness to diversity appears to be reflected in many of the knowledge practices of members of the organic movement. Organic farmers and consumers display a strong tendency towards flexibility, openness and reflexivity towards the co-existence of different ideas. They demonstrate respect for both science and for other knowledge systems such as local, traditional knowledge, which are under threat of extinction by the progressive modernisation process³⁷. Each idea, skill and person is considered as part of a greater whole, with equal importance given to each. In this diversity of ideas and knowledges, local or traditional knowledge and more 'modern' forms of knowing are valued equally and allowed to co-exist, just as organic farmers not only tolerate wild flowers growing alongside their crops, but understand them as vital for the biodiversity they seek to enhance. Thus, as long as knowledge is culturally

³⁶ Reed, "Fight the Future! How the Contemporary Campaigns of the UK Organic Movement Have Arisen from Their Composting of the Past."

³⁷ Jonathan Murdoch and Judy Clark, "Sustainable Knowledge," *Geoforum* 25, no. 2 (1994).

resonant with the aims and ideology of the organic movement, it is accepted and put to use by members.

Knowledge Diffusion as Mutual Empowerment

So far, we have considered how individual farmers, growers and consumers access and combine different knowledges. However, they also engage in practices for passing on or sharing information and skills. Organics is a social movement, aimed at changing the way we produce, distribute and consume food. Members therefore need to find new ways of doing so, but also to pass on such skills and information to each other and even to those outside the movement itself. They swap ideas, tell stories, discuss methods or explain ways of producing and preparing food to one another, to help the movement grow and reach its aims. This is the final knowledge practice in which they engage, the diffusion of knowledge. It happens within the latent networks of the organic movement, where Crossley³⁸ argues critique and innovation take place. Like knowledge combining, diffusion is guided by the culture and ideology of the organic food movement, which have become embedded in the habitus of individual members and which shape their practices. The organic movement aims to set up and support local food economies, which means that local organic producers and consumers come together in direct selling, at local markets or farmshops, where they meet and interact on a regular basis. This particular economic system, and the resulting regular contact with others in the movement, allow for face-to-face knowledge diffusion and exchange. On market stalls, producers give cooking advice to their customers, who may not be familiar with the different varieties of goods on offer, and at times stallholders even explain to consumers how to grow their own herbs and vegetables. This particular social setting also allows for the exchange of information between consumers themselves, as they meet up with others who have similar interests.

Informally, then, knowledge diffusion is embedded in everyday practices, both in the activities of selling produce and inputs and also in social interactions and events. Organic farmers and consumers share ideas and practical advice. While this informal aspect of movement knowledge practice is often overlooked (such as by Conway³⁹), less deliberate or explicit educational practices permeate the organic movement. For Emma, teaching can be explicit education such as running courses, but it can also be done implicitly, “just by example” as she calls it:

I mean, people just started you know, they are interested, they come along, they taste the cheese and they are just more aware as well about healthy things and what organic means, (...) and then there are people in the holiday homes [on her land] from all over the world, and they kind of, either they came back every year to have at least those three or four weeks, or they really changed their lives. They changed something when they came home.⁴⁰

Coming into contact with organic farmers alone can provide new experiences that help raise awareness in consumers.

Education also takes place at market stalls between producers and their consumers. Often, organic producers teach their customers about the foods they sell. On one occasion organic grower Cathy explains what duck eggs taste like; how to cook them; how to kill salmonella and how long to keep them before they go off. Another time she gives advice on

³⁸ Crossley, “From Reproduction to Transformation.”

³⁹ Janet M. Conway, *Identity, Place, Knowledge: Social Movements Contesting Globalization* (Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood, 2004).

⁴⁰ Emma Muller, interview by Annette Jorgensen, March 18, 2005.

the problems a customer is having growing their own herbs. Penny, an organic vegetable producer, has signs up on her stall explaining how to cook various produce. One sign attached to a basket of vegetables at her market stall states “Kohlrabi. Can be boiled or stir fried. Good on its own, in soups etc.” One may argue here with Patricia, a relative assisting on an organic farm, that by offering alternatives to the conventional food market consumer awareness is increased, as she points out that “to have a choice you have to know about both things”. In this way, education is informal and embedded within everyday practices of selling organic food. Organic farmers often buy input from each other, or swap produce and farm equipment. On such occasions, lively discussions about farming practices are commonplace, as farmers and growers swap stories and advice in face-to-face interactions. More formally, local groups frequently organise events where members can come together and share knowledge in tacit ways, such as workshops and open days. Information is shared during organised events such as farm walks and workshops, where organic farmers open their gates to visitors and, walking them around the farm, explain and demonstrate their work.

Likewise, social media is used to share information about training courses in organic methods, links to articles that support organic farming and practical growing and gardening advice. Many organic practitioners tweet and blog about their experiments and give practical advice to their followers. Such advice includes what to sow and plant at particular times of year (“how to grow beautiful basil”), how to deal with weeds and other problems (such as using ducks to control slug populations), and recipes for cooking organic garden produce. Using social media and the occasional appearance in the conventional mass media, can spread the information and knowledge beyond the immediate networks of the movement. Passing on the information to others, is an important way in which members can help the movement grow. Encountering information about the food system and the benefits of organic food may in fact help radicalise the habitus of non-members and set them on the path to joining. However, most often the knowledge is shared among those already committed to organic principles. This is a way of empowering one another, both practically, in succeeding in producing high volumes of quality organic food, but also philosophically: even in those already committed, new evidence or advice can help reinforce their own motivations for producing or consuming organic food. Encountering fresh evidence can help sustain feelings of passion, it can renew their feelings that what they are doing is worthwhile,⁴¹ and as such, knowledge sharing can help counteract doubts, exhaustion and burn-out so often experienced by members of social movements.⁴² In this way, members of the organic movement help reinforce the radical habitus in one another.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined some of the knowledge practices engaged in by members of the Irish organic food movement – accessing, combining and diffusing different ideas, skills and understandings. I began by noting Bourdieu’s theory of practice goes a long way towards theorising such practices. It helps us understand that individual members are both influenced by their sociocultural contexts (such as the wider field of food production, and the organic movement itself) and that they actively make sense of such contexts through a framework (or habitus) that is shaped by their own past experiences. Crossley’s concept of the radical habitus, reshaped by new experiences and disposed towards critique and reflexion, can help

⁴¹ Crossley, “Working Utopias and Social Movements.”

⁴² Jessica T. Kovan and John M. Dirkx, “‘Being Called Awake’: The Role Of Transformative Learning In The Lives Of Environmental Activists,” *Adult Education Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (February 1, 2003), doi:10.1177/0741713602238906.

us understand the knowledge practice of members of the Irish organic food movement as systematic and consistent with the practices of organic food production in general.

The radical habitus, then, is what makes producers and consumers of organic food critical of conventional systems of food production and distribution, and it makes them seek out new techniques of methods for alternative, more sustainable methods. It also influences how they relate to such knowledge and skills in three different ways: firstly, a reflexive disposition makes members of the organic movement inclined towards accessing or creating alternative forms of knowledge. They actively seek out new experiences, whether encounters or experimentation, which will add to their stock of skills and ideas. Secondly, the radical habitus, which has been shaped by the ideology of the organic food movement, allows them to evaluate, select and combine knowledge from different sources, knowledge which must resonate with the cultural worldview, embedded in their habitus. It provides a yardstick that helps them decide between the contradictory knowledges and skills that apply to food production and consumption. In other words, the radical habitus helps them decide which knowledge, and what knowledge practices, are culturally resonant, within the context of the movement. Finally, as members of a social movement, similarities in the habitus of organic food producers and consumers mean they see the world in relatively similar ways. They are all members of the latent networks of the movement, and they actively seek to pass on and exchange information, skills and ideas to one another, thereby reinforcing this particular way of understanding the world, re-radicalising each other's habitus.

Based on this discussion, we can therefore conclude that the critical and reflexive ways in which members of the organic movement use knowledge are indeed radical practices, inspired by the radical habitus that is shared by its members, resonant with the ideology of the organic food movement and shaped by their lived experiences of it. In terms of structure and agency, using the concepts of habitus and practice has allowed us to understand how the sociocultural context in which they act, in particular the organic food movement, guides their action, yet as individuals they are aware and reflexive in making choices and seeking out and sharing new learning experiences that are resonant with the ideology of the movement to which they are committed.

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